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ABSTRACT

This study investigated primary grade literacy teachers' attitudes toward and practices in alternative assessment by examining the relationship between each and by identifying factors which influence each. Data collection consisted of a survey of 73 elementary schools within one Intermediate Unit in Pennsylvania. Both quantitative and qualitative measures were analyzed to answer proposed research questions. Primary grade literacy teachers (n=482) were asked to respond to questions relating to their school and professional attributes, the professional development opportunities afforded them, and their knowledge or and practices in alternative assessment. Survey findings from 159 respondents show that small class size, district-sponsored training, and sufficient time for planning, implementation, collaboration, and reflection contributed overall to teachers' knowledge of and practices in alternative assessment. Teachers' attitudes toward alternative assessment were also influenced by the professional freedom to choose assessment techniques. Teacher practices in alternative assessment were shown to increase when administrator support, sufficient resources, scholarly reading, and the professional freedom to choose assessment techniques increased. Based on these results, several recommendations for educators are made to prompt more effective assessment in primary grade classrooms. (Contains 5 tables and 28 references.) (Author/SLD)

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Alternative Assessment: Primary Grade Literacy Teachers' Attitudes and Practices

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Abstract

This research study investigated primary grade literacy teachers' attitudes towards and practices in alternative assessment by examining the relationship between each and by identifying factors which influence each. Data collection consisted of a survey method which included elementary schools (N = 73) within one Intermediate Unit in the state of Pennsylvania and in which both quantitative and qualitative measures were analyzed to answer proposed research questions. Primary grade literacy teachers (N = 482) were asked to respond to questions relating to their school and professional attributes, the professional development opportunities afforded to them, and their attitudes towards and practices in alternative assessment. Survey results (N = 159) showed that small class size and sufficient time for planning, implementation, collaboration, and reflection contributed overall to teachers' positive attitudes towards and practices in alternative assessment. Teacher attitudes towards alternative assessment were also influenced by the professional freedom to choose assessment techniques. Teacher practices in alternative assessment were shown to increase when administrator support, sufficient resources, scholarly reading, and the professional freedom to choose assessment techniques increased. Based upon these results, several recommendations for educators are made to promote more effective assessment in primary grade classrooms.

Purpose of the Study

A major concern of educators is the recent effort to reform assessment procedures to adequately reflect student needs. As educators become increasingly accountable for

student learning, the role that schools in general, and teachers in particular, can play in providing assessment programs which truly demonstrate students' conceptual understanding is increasingly important. Because quality assessment helps to determine what children know, can do, and are interested in (Darling-Hammond, Ancess, & Falk, 1995), alternative assessment has been heralded for its consideration of children's actual performance over time on relevant and meaningful activities (Wiggins, 1993). With the ultimate goal of boosting academic achievement, alternative assessment is based upon not only knowledge of content, but upon how students are thinking and processing information as well (Wittrock & Baker, 1991).

Although current literature supports the use of alternative assessment as a key to educational reform, little attention has been devoted to determining how educators perceive alternative assessment as a measurement device, or how teacher attitudes actually affect instructional practices. The present study addresses these issues by directly surveying classroom teachers to determine their attitudes towards and practices in alternative assessment.

The purposes of this survey study are: 1) to investigate and examine the relationship between primary grade literacy teachers' attitudes towards and instructional practices in alternative assessment; and 2) to identify factors influencing primary grade literacy teachers' attitudes towards and practices in alternative assessment.

Theoretical Framework

An important part of instructional practice, assessment at its best is multifaceted and multidimensional; it includes ongoing performance on meaningful tasks and also embraces children's attitudes, processes, efforts, and products (Isenberg & Jalongo,

1997). In the past, attempts to determine this information have involved utilizing a single evaluative instrument such as a standardized or multiple-choice test. This type of assessment, often known as "traditional assessment," has been considered the logical choice for testing large numbers of students in specific content areas due to its cost-effectiveness and manageability (Popham, 2001; Worthen, 1993). Research which supports a more holistic and integrative approach to education has led in a search for approaches to assessment which differ significantly from norm-referenced standardized tests or from teacher constructed multiple-choice exams (Hamayan, 1995). Because traditional assessment excludes the many types of knowledge and performances expected of students in today's world, the use of alternative assessment has been viewed as a reform which will move students from passive to active learners, thus improving student achievement in the process (Baker, Freeman, & Clayton, 1991; Birenbaum, & Feldman, 1998).

Successful implementation of alternative assessment involves the integration of both attitudes and practices. How teachers perceive their role in the evaluative process and their willingness to use alternative assessment in their classrooms play an important part in classroom practice and successful implementation (Allington & Walmsley, 1995). Ultimately, innovative assessment programs aimed at improving academic achievement and emotional well being of young children will depend largely on the creativity, attitudes, and skills of teachers (Jalongo, 2000).

Many researchers support the use of alternative assessment in primary grade literacy development (Birenbaum & Feldman, 1998; Birrell & Ross, 1996; Earl & LeMahieu, 1997; Popham, 2001; Roe & Vukelich, 1997; Supovitz & Brennan, 1997; Tomlinson, 2001). The

information gained from alternative assessment can be used: 1) to integrate classroom instruction and evaluation procedures (Shepard et al., 1996), 2) to provide evaluation techniques relevant to students (Travis, 1996), 3) to encourage students to take responsibility for their work (Gibboney & Webb, 2001), 4) to provide an ongoing, holistic picture of student performance (Shepard et al., 1996), and 5) to implement high quality instruction that is not only of interest to learners, but builds upon their knowledge and thought processes as well (Wittrock & Baker, 1991). Experts agree that fairness to children demands that they are taught skills necessary to make decisions about the knowledge that is available to them; as information becomes more easily accessible and increasingly vast, students must be prepared not only to store and retrieve data, but must also be experts at synthesizing, analyzing, and evaluating information to determine its usefulness (Culbertson & Jalongo, 1999).

Although many practitioners recognize the potential of alternative assessment as a worthwhile endeavor in early childhood programs, many find the demands of such a practice to be threatening to its successful implementation. In a recent study of elementary teachers, for example, Rueda and Garcia (1996) found that all had overwhelming and sometimes conflicting demands placed upon them. Many described getting through the day as a "balancing act" in which they tried to accommodate competing demands for their attention and time. They described feeling locked into practices that often hampered their efforts to experiment with new techniques. Teachers felt very limited in terms of time and resources, and stated that clerical work took away from time to investigate what individual children were thinking and how to help them. Studies of the Kentucky Instructional Results Information System (KIRIS), a high-stakes, performance-based assessment program used to grant financial rewards to schools,

support that teachers often feel ill-prepared to implement alternative assessment strategies (Guskey, 1994). "The perceptions of little time and lots of extra work, combined with inadequate experience, training, and materials, appeared to keep most teachers frozen in virtually the same instructional patterns that they had before the new assessment system" (Guskey, p. 53). Vitali (1993) supports this conclusion and adds that in most cases, alternative assessment programs alone do not cause teachers to change their instructional practices; only those teachers who teach in a manner conducive to the reform before alternative assessment programs are mandated provide instruction which reflects a constructivist theory of learning. These studies suggest that only through intensive support for teachers in their efforts to meld assessment, instruction, and curriculum will positive changes in assessment practices occur (Kane & Khattri, 1995).

Although current literature supports the use of alternative assessment as a valid and dynamic key to educational reform, the state of our knowledge concerning the types and quality of support for teachers using alternative assessment is far less supported, for even when educators are informed that they should be using alternative assessment, its many obstacles often challenge classroom implementation (Abruscato, 1993; Roe & Vukelich, 1997). Thus, for educators, the question is less one of whether alternative assessment is a viable option and more of whether alternative assessment programs can be successfully implemented within current systems of curricular and instructional goals. Specifically, the issue is not really one of assessment practices, but rather of the identification of positive influences on assessment practices that lead to improved academic achievement.

Methods

A survey was conducted to examine teachers' attitudes and practices concerning alternative assessment. Schools were selected utilizing a list of districts provided by the Northwest Tri-County Intermediate Unit which consists of 17 school districts and 73 elementary schools in three counties in Pennsylvania. Completed and returned surveys numbered 159 (95.8% of those who signed consent forms). Data were collected during the 1998-1999 school year.

Content validity of the survey questionnaire was established through the ratings of early childhood literacy teachers, university professors, and school administrators. Only those statements agreed upon by 90% of the educators were considered for the final instrument. Piloting of the survey was then completed to evaluate items for clarity and balance. To achieve internal consistency, certain questions were rephrased and repeated on the questionnaire. Factor analysis was conducted to confirm that the survey instrument measured both teacher attitudes and practices. Reliability of the questionnaire was examined using Cronbach's alpha method. Results show that these coefficients ranged from .63 to .74.

The final survey instrument contained eight items referred to as Teacher/school attributes, which described such areas as teacher levels of education, years of experience, and school settings. The second portion of the questionnaire asked respondents to rate thirty Likert items in order to describe their attitudes towards and practices in alternative assessment. The third portion of the survey addressed the topic of Professional Development Opportunities in areas such as administrator support, availability of resources, professional reading habits, and collegial interaction. Lastly, three open-ended

items were included on the survey instrument to invite respondents to write separate answers indicating their perceptions of alternative assessment.

Results and Conclusions

Descriptive statistics, or those used to summarize and meaningfully describe many scores with a small number of indices (Gay, 1996), were obtained. Measures of central tendency and frequency distributions were utilized in the analysis of teacher and school attributes (Table 1) and professional development opportunities (Table 2).

(Place Table 1 and Table 2 about here.)

Nine survey items were used to determine teachers' level of support for alternative assessment. When asked to state their support for a particular type of assessment, about 71% of teachers surveyed indicated support for alternative assessment over traditional assessment, with 40.2% indicating that standardized tests were not useful in the primary grade classroom. When asked if they would be more willing to initiate an alternative assessment program if there was district-sponsored time to do so, about 88.6% of teachers surveyed indicated agreement that they would be more willing, with 21.5% of those teachers strongly agreeing. Over 96% of the surveyed teachers indicated their disagreement with the statement, "Alternative assessment provides very little information to me as a teacher and is a waste of instructional time in the primary grade classroom." Table 3 displays means and standard deviations for survey questions dealing with teacher attitudes towards alternative assessment.

(Place Table 3 about here.)

The second area of analysis sought to describe primary grade literacy teachers' instructional practices in alternative assessment. Almost 85% of the surveyed teachers indicated that they used some form of alternative assessment (e.g., portfolios, checklists, and projects) on a weekly basis. When asked if they used alternative assessment solely because their districts mandated it, 92.4% of respondents did not agree, indicating willingness on their part to utilize some form of alternative assessment. The area of teacher observation was the area in which most teachers agreed upon usefulness in their classrooms. Table 4 displays descriptive data for survey questions dealing with instructional practices in the use of alternative assessment.

(Place Table 4 about here.)

Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to examine possible relationships between attitudes and practices with many significant at the .05 level. The most significant positive relationship found was that of support for the use of portfolios and teachers' use of some form of alternative assessment (e.g., portfolios, checklists, classroom projects) on a weekly basis ($r(159) = .380$, $p < .01$). In other words, the study indicates that when teachers support the use of portfolios they are likely to use other forms of alternative assessment in their classrooms as well. A significant positive correlation was noted in teacher support of alternative assessment over traditional assessment ($r(159) = .361$, $p < .01$). Correlations also indicated that the more teachers feel that time and manageability are hindrances to alternative assessment use, the less they utilize the practice on a weekly basis and the less they use alternative assessment over teacher-made exams.

This study also sought to identify specific factors which influence primary grade literacy teachers' attitudes and practices. Teacher/school attributes (such as years of experience and class size) along with professional development opportunities (such as availability of resources and administrator support), which have been linked to successful reform efforts were examined. Analysis of Variance was computed to determine the effects of teacher/school attributes or professional development opportunities on teachers' attitudes towards and practices in alternative assessment. Data revealed that teachers who had 18 or fewer years experience had higher levels of support for alternative assessment, but did not practice it more frequently. Class size was shown to have an impact on both attitudes and practices, with smaller class-size resulting in higher mean values for teachers reported in all areas. Very few significant differences were noted in the areas of: (a) teachers' educational level; (b) school enrollment; and (c) school demographic setting. Professional development opportunities, however, revealed significant differences in several areas. Teacher attitudes were affected by the availability of nondistrict sponsored training while teacher practices were more affected by district sponsored training. In addition, teacher practices were affected by administrator support, the availability of resources, and by the reading of scholarly journals. Both attitudes and practices showed higher mean values when teachers were granted the professional freedom to choose appropriate assessment strategies for their students. Overall, the results of Analysis of Variance indicate that there are specific teacher/school attributes and professional development opportunities that influence primary grade literacy teachers' attitudes towards and practices in alternative assessment. Table 5 shows the results of Inferential Analysis of these factors.

(Place Table 5 about here.)

In addition to quantitative analysis, participants were asked to respond to open ended questions on the survey instrument. When asked, "What do you feel are the advantages or disadvantages of using alternative assessment with primary grade children?" respondents indicated several benefits for students including: (a) the alleviation of test anxiety; (b) the allowance for differing modalities of learning; (c) the allowance for students to actively participate in assessment; and (d) the fostering of student understanding of difficulties.

Respondents also indicated several benefits of alternative assessment over traditional assessment for the teacher. Those which repeatedly appeared on survey were: (a) alternative assessment promotes teacher knowledge of students; (b) it helps teachers to plan for future instruction; (c) it allows for greater variety and flexibility on the part of the teacher; and (d) it demonstrates growth over time.

Four categories of responses were indicated as advantages to curriculum and instruction, namely: (a) alternative assessment makes instruction more relevant and meaningful; (b) it promotes ongoing assessment; (c) it provides for more student-driven instruction; and (d) it provides a more accurate means of reporting.

Respondents were asked to indicate the disadvantages of alternative assessment use which appeared in the following categories: (a) student inability to assess efficiently; (b) teacher time and manageability; (c) teacher lack of knowledge; and (d) subjectivity in reporting. Forty-one respondents indicated time and manageability issues as disadvantages to alternative assessment, thus highly concentrating the disadvantages in one area.

The second open-ended question to which teachers were asked to respond was: What are some of the difficulties (constraints) in your practice of alternative assessment? Recurring themes which appeared throughout the responses were those of: (a) lack of time; (b) management difficulties; (c) difficulties in reporting; (d) lack of teacher knowledge; (e) large class size; and (f) reluctance to change. Once again, the lack of time was the number one item mentioned as a difficulty or constraint to teachers' practice of alternative assessment. A computer word count showed that the word "time" had 211 occurrences in teacher responses to this question. In fact, of the 141 teachers who reported difficulties in their practice, 129 or about 91.5% reported the lack of time as a constraint.

Along with open-ended questions, a checklist was provided for teachers to indicate what types of assessment they used in their classrooms. Data indicate that almost all of the 159 participating teachers use the alternative practice of teacher observation as a form of assessment. Over half of the responding teachers also use the alternative assessment practices of: (a) portfolios; (b) journal writing; (c) open ended questions; (d) checklists; (e) anecdotal records; (f) projects; (g) demonstrations; and (h) student self-assessment. Data also reveal that teachers surveyed use traditional forms of assessment as well which include: (a) standardized tests; (b) multiple-choice tests; and (c) short answer tests.

Both quantitative and qualitative analyses indicate that teachers in this study recognized the difficulties or constraints associated with their practice of alternative assessment. Teacher attitudes do, however, reveal that alternative assessment is worth the effort as advantages to the practice are noted throughout the study.

Educational Importance of the Study

As public policy increasingly focuses on the accountability of teachers, the acknowledgment that classroom teachers must play a role in reforming assessment procedures to adequately reflect student achievement must increase, thus fully recognizing the importance of teacher expertise in the process. Alternative assessment is lauded as a valid reform that can bring about needed change. However, this study confirms that teacher knowledge of alternative assessment alone is insufficient. Professional development opportunities must be provided for teachers in order to improve teacher attitudes and to thus increase teacher practice. Allowing for varied background experiences of teachers, realizing the part played by teachers in the change process, and providing experiences in which continuous growth and development may occur, are key entities in reform efforts, not only for students, but for those who work with them as well.

Perhaps the most noteworthy finding of this study was that both teacher attitudes towards and practices in alternative assessment increased as teachers were given the professional freedom to choose appropriate assessment strategies to meet the needs of the students in their classrooms. This finding is supported by the work of Darling-Hammond (1998) and Forster (1997) who view teacher leadership as fundamental to educational reform. Support for teachers as educational leaders has been found to improve both teaching and learning experiences for not only students, but for teachers as well. Teacher choice provides the impetus for teachers as leaders and is based on the premise that if curriculum and instruction are to become responsive to student needs, decisions about curriculum and instruction should be made by those closest to the learners—the teachers

in the classrooms (Darling-Hammond, 1998). This study supports the premise that teacher choice is a key element in successful educational change efforts (Arlin, 1999; Brookfield, 1995; Forster, 1997) through the finding that teacher choice contributed both to improved teacher attitudes towards and practices in alternative assessment.

Further implications for educators and policy makers resulting from this study include:

(a) Teacher attitudes and practices must be addressed simultaneously when initiating the reform of alternative assessment. Attempts to increase one area without the other may be futile. Traditional training, which focuses solely on increasing teacher knowledge, will not suffice to improve teacher practices. Teachers must be given time for planning, implementation, collaboration, and reflection of their assessment program.

(b) Class size must be kept as low as possible to allow teachers to carry out an alternative assessment program. Meeting individual needs is an important element of alternative assessment, which becomes increasingly difficult with each additional student.

(c) Teacher training must focus on developing one reform effort over time rather than targeting a different area with each teacher inservice. Sustained focus on alternative assessment may provide teachers with the time they need and may promote more positive attitudes to make changes in practice.

(d) Sufficient resources must be provided. Physical as well as human resources are necessary to successfully implement an alternative assessment program.

(e) Whenever possible, teachers should be given the opportunity to make professional decisions regarding assessment which they feel will work best for their students. Decisions based upon current research and careful reflection will not only benefit the children in their charge, but will improve teacher attitudes towards and practices in alternative assessment as well.

Conclusion

As the accountability of both teachers and students increases, the role that teachers play in assuring student success becomes paramount. An increasing focus on valid assessment practices as well as teacher input in designing assessments which truly measure the progress of individual students are crucial if assessment alternatives are to truly benefit American education (Cizek, 1995). In short, the development of attitudes of support for alternative forms of assessment must be recognized as playing a significant and contributing role in teacher practices.

> Enabling all children to attain their highest potential and to acquire the knowledge and skills they need to be successful citizens in the 21st century will require much from us all, working in new and more effective ways with one another and with policymakers and practitioners. . . All of us will need to take responsibility and play our part in improving education and assuring our society's future success. (Herman, 2003, p. 43)

With the ultimate goal of increasing the academic achievement and emotional well being of the students in their charge, teachers in this study view alternative assessment as a valid reform effort that with support can bring about needed change.

As this study was limited to primary grade literacy teachers, further study is needed to determine additional factors which influence teacher attitudes and practices in alternative assessment. The survey data, supported by the Review of the Literature, presents a picture of alternative assessment as a complex, challenging, and worthwhile endeavor, which overwhelmingly depends upon teacher attitudes and practices for its success in the classroom.

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Table 1

Teacher and School Attributes

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Years taught	159	16.8400	9.5300
Current number of students in class	156	22.1100	8.6500
Number of teachers in building who teach in same grade or area of specialization	159	3.2800	1.8900
Total school enrollment	156	489.8000	182.5700
Valid N (listwise)	153		

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent
Teacher Gender				
Valid	Male	6	3.8	3.8
	Female	153	96.2	96.2
	Total	159	100.0	100.0
Highest educational degree attained				
Valid	Bachelor's Degree	45	28.3	28.3
	Master's or Equivalency	89	56.0	56.0
	Master's +	25	15.7	15.7
	Total	159	100.0	100.0
School Setting (Urban, Suburban, Rural)				
Valid	Urban	21	13.2	13.2
	Suburban	47	29.6	29.6
	Rural	91	57.2	57.2
	Total	159	100.0	100.0

Table 2

Professional Development Opportunities

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Administrator support	159	2.4200	.7900
Resources provided	159	2.4800	.7400
Reading scholarly journals	157	2.5500	.6800
Freedom to choose assessment format	157	2.8900	.6700
Number of inservice days in alternative assessment	158	2.2300	.8000
Nondistrict sponsored workshops or conferences in assessment	158	1.9900	.9200
Common planning time/collaboration with other professionals	159	1.9900	1.0800
Valid N (listwise)	155		

Note. Data were based upon a four point scale with 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree.

Table 3

Attitudes of Support for Alternative Assessment Practices

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Support for alternative assessment Over traditional assessment	157	2.9400	.7400
Lack of support for information Provided by standardized tests	159	2.4700	.7600
Lack of support for the traditional Role of standardized tests	159	2.9500	.6000
Lack of support for assessment's Purpose as determining grades	158	3.1100	.6300
Lack of support for traditional Report cards	157	2.4500	.6500
Support for usefulness of Alternative assessment	158	3.4200	.5900
Support for student interviews Over traditional assessment	159	3.2100	.6300
Support for student self-assessment	159	2.9400	.5900
Support for classroom portfolio use	157	3.0400	.5500

Note. Data were based upon a four point scale with 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree.

Table 4

Instructional Practices in Alternative Assessment

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
Practices in weekly use of alternative assessment	159	3.1300	.6400
Practices in district mandated assessment	158	3.1900	.5800
Practices in student self-assessment for reflection	157	2.6900	.6400
Practices in student self-assessment for report card grades	156	2.3700	.6600
Practices in use of teacher made tests	157	2.6600	.7000
Practices in weekly use of portfolios	158	2.5600	.7700
Practices in daily teacher observation	159	3.3300	.6400
Valid N (listwise)			

Note. Data were based upon a four point scale with 1 = Strongly Disagree, 2 = Disagree, 3 = Agree, and 4 = Strongly Agree.

Table 5

Results of Inferential analysis of Factors Influencing Attitudes Toward and Practices in Alternative Assessment

	Class Size	Administrator Support	Availability of Resources	Scholarly Reading	District Sponsored Training	Nondistrict Sponsored Training	Professional Freedom to Choose Assessment Techniques
Attitudes	X					X	X
Practices	X	X	X	X	X		X

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